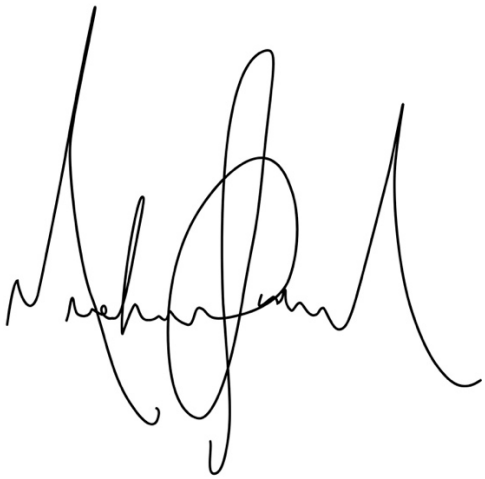
Lance Mazmanian
note@mazmanian.net
Non-Fiction (3,696 Words)



Michael Jackson aka MJ

In fall 1987 I was locked alone in a room with Michael Jackson (The King of Pop; The Gloved One) for 30 minutes or so. Twice.

It revealed much.

Let's begin with context: regardless of pending futures, in 1987 Michael Jackson was the biggest entertainment star in human history, ahead of Elvis and The Beatles. Nobody had MJ's stellar international status, both with populations and heads of state. He was, in many ways, mythological. And he out sold everyone, in terms of revenue.

Like some dude who came down from Olympus.

With *that* in order...

In 1987 I was working the Las Vegas Strip, doing nights at the legendary Caesars Palace. My job? Usher (top and bottom) for the popular Caesars Palace Omnimax Theatre, a genuine IMAX gone spherical. Basically a titan movie screen, curved almost like a ball, holding something like 300 seats or so, with steep angles. Add insanely expensive speaker systems, hidden from view, then IMAX sanctioned projector machinery, run by an elevated xenon bulb and massive film reels.

There was even a Nakamichi Dragon high-end audio cassette tape unit, the Gold Version, for intro music while seating. Bought for the theatre at the low low cost of US$16,500 in 2026 money.

The Omnimax in Vegas was a big deal in 1987. With multiple levels, the projection booth was brazenly displayed through large, secured glass plates as people entered.

Glitterati showed to get the awesome Omnimax experience, top names of entertainment. A few not so top, but still far out.

For my Omnimax shift on the night in question, an additional usher called sick so I basically had solo duty.

The management staff, as normal, was downstairs at the edge of the front casino, maybe 50 feet from the later iconic RAIN MAN escalator (the one Dustin and Cruise came down, well-dressed). Management did box office sales and came up to the theatre for occasional supervision, maybe a snack or two.

Around 8:20 PM, I sat mindless at the Omnimax main entry, a set of double metallic doors painted black. Typical brass stanchions made a line away from the door. A heavy "tickets and times" display was stashed inside, for unblocked answers to the many tourist questions.

As people lined-up with the stanchions for the 9 PM show, at a point I had to leave and completely open the place so the former audience could exit. This required placing the heavy tickets/times thing to block the main entry door.

I was about to take care of that when I got an urgent telephone from downstairs: Michael Jackson was on his way, with his managers and father. I asked if they had security personnel, like the Sultan of Brunei always carried (quite annoying at times, but the Sultan was nice enough).

No, just the four. Hm. Okay, I'll wait. Instructions were, let Michael Jackson enjoy everything, escorted. No interaction with MJ or managers. Or father. Keep MJ secure.

The last part really got me. "Keep MJ secure"...? Was never asked that kinda deal before. Not like I was packing Desert Eagle with a nightstick.

Furthermore, Omnimax ushers wore ridiculous silvery Jetson-esque outfits, a subject of constant movie goer ridicule. A year later we'd have casual blue suits that looked like they fell off a landfill wagon...but for now, Jetsons. *Unarmed*.

Should also admit that I wasn't a Michael Jackson fan at the time. Respected his talent, knew much about his Jehovah's Witnesses gig. But his music back then? Didn't move me.

Years later, that would change. I came to admire not only MJ's incredible abilities, but his tunes were cool, too.

Of course his life near the end is a different thing. I'll get to that when I finish.

So I hear screams in the Caesars casino downstairs. Pretty sure you know why. Coming up the RAIN MAN escalator was The Gloved One himself, in full regalia: hat, clothes, fist, shoes, everything. Exactly the image always associated with the cat, a kind of heavy metal look done to his own design.

Behind Michael was a pair of finely suited managers, one you saw in GOODFELLAS: Frank DiLeo, music biz powerhouse, slightly short and very round, huge cigar. Remember? Guy who popped Joe Pesci at his GOODFELLAS "made" ceremony? One of the greatest US films, ever. If unfamiliar with DiLeo, run, don't walk, to the closest streaming channel.

As for the second manager, a somewhat older chap, tall and sorta skinny...not familiar. I beg forgiveness. Didn't see Jackson's old man coming up from behind, but I *did* see a massive crowd that looked like the population of Jersey went nuts and invaded the Love Boat. Cries of Michael's name, whistles, tears...by people of many ages and types: kids, adults, old folks. Wow.

As MJ walked off the escalator he was quickly followed by his managers. The Omnimax audience in line at my door got all stunned and wide-eyed. The father still wasn't around, though.

Michael Jackson looked at me and smiled large. I grinned and nodded back. At that point the crowd from the escalator ran toward Jackson, and the two managers sort of allowed room for them to interact. Standard routine, one reckons.

Michael waved and people went nuts. Utterly. As I said before, we had many well-known artists come around the Omnimax, but I'd never seen this sort of emotional extreme from a public crowd. Men and women bellowed, went all sobbing, pulled their own hair...damn.

I'm positive Jackson saw this kinda thing many times in the span of a quick week. People thrusting items his way... He signed a few. I didn't interfere. Just allowed his managers to manage. But the crowd got more frenetic, to a point of concern. A bit unkind and demanding.

MJ turned and looked my way directly, sort of opening his eyes like a signal. I took control rods off the main door and motioned to the Jackson managers. DiLeo slapped his monster cigar in mouth and grabbed Jackson's arm, moving MJ toward the entrance. In they quickly came, and I shut the door...barely.

Yeah, the crowd immediately smashed the black metal, desperate to get in. I locked the frame, but the mob outside moved to a secured secondary entrance off to the right, where they kicked and banged like Star Wars stormtroopers.

So here we are: Just Michael Jackson, his two managers, myself. MJ right away sees the high-tech Omnimax projection room, sealed behind the huge two-story glass pieces. Jackson's eyes turn to saucers. The projection room, with no entrance at this point, is maybe large as 7-11 gas station. MJ looks it over intensely. Like a scientist. The managers sorta just hang near Michael.

I waited. It was close to clearing the theatre audience from the last show, but I didn't say anything. Yet.

Michael turned and looked at me, with a big smile. He sort of signaled gently, so I walked over. Made his managers a little concerned, but not too much. I think they were quickly figuring out I was completely trustworthy and not at all engaged in some kinda "fame" thing.

Michael says, "Excuse me, sir. Can I use your bathroom?" Wow. Quite a natural voice from MJ. Soft, smooth, slower-paced, dreamy. And he called me *Sir*. Haha! Very respectful for a guy a few days older than seven years from my own birthday.

It was here I noticed his skin, under the brighter alcove lights. Face and arms, both. Vitiligo? No question MJ dealt with it from around 1982, at least. Speculation says the disease Lupus, *combined* with vitiligo, plagued Jackson to the end.

But on that evening, in the Omnimax, in 1987, Michael Jackson looked fine. Normal. Nothing unusual at all.

Michael needed to use the bathroom. So I looked at the managers, especially DiLeo. "That okay with everybody?" I said.

DiLeo wasn't sure. "Where is it?" he asked. I told him it was down the hall in front of us, right turn through the glass. DiLeo seemed okay with it, pointed his cigar where I mentioned. I nodded and signaled MJ to follow. Off we went.

With his cool footwear, Michael was the same height as myself, 6'0" (1.8m). I later learned that his shoe soles were an extra three inches thick. More or less. Hm.

Hey, none of my business.

We walked down the hall, around the big glass. The managers carefully eyed us, but Michael and I got briefly out of the their view. There I opened the sizable glass projection room door, allowing Michael to enter.

The funny part: to get to the bathroom, we had to walk *back* to the spot his managers were standing. We'd be inside the glass, though, right in front of the projector machinery and film reels. As we crossed by the managers, they mucho freaked out. Like they couldn't understand how Michael and I had even gotten there, or why they couldn't follow!

The only other person in the room was the projectionist, George, hidden at his desk where we entered. George liked to read during the shows and had no idea Jackson was with me.

Near the center of the facility, MJ stops and looks around. He's enchanted with the Omnimax film tech and really studies it.

Jackson's managers on the other side of the glass are still bonkers though, because to them MJ is 100% vulnerable. Have to guess that never happened with Michael Jackson in 1987, at all.

To comfort the pair, I tried this: "Michael, have a look at this deck. I think you'll like it." So I took MJ about 10 feet to the incredible technical bank where the Nakamichi Gold Dragon was hung, along with several other big-time audio goods. Being a pro, MJ knew exactly what he saw: "Oh, I *looove* Nakamichi."

I looked back at the managers, to see if they were any calmer. They were. Nervous, but not apeshit like before. I put on a smile and whispered to MJ, "I think your managers are in a hurry."

Jackson rolled his eyes. "Yeah, they can be that way. But I really gotta go, though." I pointed him toward the bathroom deep in the back, totally gone from view. The managers both got a bit nutso again, even putting hands on the glass. I looked back and just smiled...with an "okay" sign.

MJ and I disappeared. We entered the "secret" rear area, a bathroom and kitchen space no bigger than a 70s van: tight, with cool lighting on a darker side, a microwave, sink, coffee maker, tiny fridge. I opened the small bathroom door for Michael and then moved a couple feet to the kitchen.

At this time in 1987, several outré rumors were afoot about Michael Jackson. Things about The Elephant Man, and a bizarro idea that MJ had no sex organs, instead built like a Ken doll down there, flat and featureless...

Well, the Ken doll thing went straight to the toilet, so to say. I guarantee MJ's bathroom audio came from some kind of human appendage. Loud enough to wake a taxi. Another stupid pop-culture rumor, gone.

Didn't wanna embarrass MJ over his jingles, so I raised my voice and said, "Michael, would you like some tea or coffee?" He answered, "No, that's okay," and finished his biz.

In a few seconds MJ flushed and walked out, went straight to wash in the sink.

When Michael was clean and toweled, he slowly explored the mini-kitchen. He opened the fridge, examined the inside, pushed on the lightbulb trigger, closed the fridge, touched a few things around the coffee maker (like the Silex pot). Curious, indeed.

Then he looked at me, smiling. "You like it here?" I laughed a little. "It can be fun."

"Yeah," he says. He sat on the minimal sink counter, legs hanging. He was comfortable, looked around, moved his shoes.

"Nice and quiet in here," he said.

I decided to relax against the refrigerator, allowing MJ to be and do whatever he wanted, long as he wanted. Why the hell not?

He looked in my eyes, smiling but peaceful. I smiled back. Communication? Coded DNA? Neurological broadcasting?

His lock on my eyes went on and on. Not really easy to kinda stare at a person, or stare back. Couple things: Myself, I'm straight. And a close, known ally to the gay community, for decades.

It was clear MJ had something on his mind, to ask. I wasn't concerned in the least, whatever it might be. His unusual nature I found fascinating.

After literally two-minutes of his isolated eye visit, he says, "Well, I better go. Those two are gonna get mad." Out of the cinema realm we walked, MJ first.

Outside, the DiLeo dude and his pal looked relieved as hell. I told the group they should now catch the crazy ball-shaped theatre from its best side, which allows them to leave the show in safety. I'd arranged it with others, before.

At this point George the projectionist, a funny guy, came out from his desk and mingled with Omnimax equipment. This meant the show for now was done, and people were leaving.

Perfect.

I led MJ and his guys into the theatre, stopping at the left wing entry. I told them not everyone in the earlier audience had gone, so I had them stay as I went inside. Indeed there were maybe 15 people milling about, making their way to the upper exits.

And none had the slightest idea who was down in the left wing.

At the 1987 Omnimax, the only disability seats were front and bottom row, with wheelchair bunkers. All other seats traveled major upward angles. Exits were two at either side of the halfway mark, two at the top. Both sent people through an internal second floor mezzanine where they saw movie machinery through glass panes above.

The best and most secure theatre seat for Michael was a side spot almost to the top, right above a rail where ushers generally sat next to the rising projector and a phone.

Once the previous audience left, I walked Michael and the two managers inside. We got to their seating, I sat them and explained what was next:

Five minutes before the end of the movie, a light on the phone would flash. They should walk all the way to the top of the theatre, open the exit. I'll wait right there to securely take them down, and back to the RAIN MAN escalator.

They agreed, and Michael, after sitting down with his managers said, "Thank you so much." And that, I thought, was that.

I left the theatre from the top door as a demo, then rushed down to get the next audience seated. I locked both stairways, swung to the main entrance.

My boss was there, an attractive woman about four years older, well-dressed and Greek (if I remember). She walked to projection while I tore tickets and allowed the new audience inside. After tix were collected, I walked into the theatre just before the show started, took a look near the top where MJ and his guys were. Nobody bothered the trio. Cool.

Movie started.

Time moved, and the movie was almost done. I secured the front door, signaled to the manager I was on my way to the rear stairs. She knew what to do. But something bugged me:

If things went south, then what? Well, there was a jet-black steel emergency door I could use that I'd only opened once, with a key. I decided to bring the key. May not need it. Who knows.

I went outside and opened the red ropes on the fancy back stairs exit. Once done I headed to the top of the theatre and into the upper lit exit, behind audience seats. I peeked out, toward MJ and his guys. With the movie still playing, my manager triggered the small phone in front of them. A silent light flashed once.

It was time.

While the Omnimax movie credits started, Michael stood and ran quickly up the stairs. For DiLeo and his pal, this was not good. No way they could run up wooden stairs that steep.

And that did it.

Once people saw Michael jumping toward the top, it was over. The audience around the back and middle got out of their seats and gave chase.

With only myself standing around and MJ's managers buried in bodies, there was a risk to Michael's safety. So before he entered the exit I pulled the emergency key and opened that ancient steel security door.

It was lit inside, clearly checked by staff at least once a day with one of those metal chain box timer things. Good.

Michael Jackson burst through the theatre exit door, and didn't look happy: behind him were dozens of people, clearly possessed.

In a move that happened super quick, Michael saw me in the open steel door and ran forward. Once he was in, I slammed it.

The second I had the security door closed, people battered with fists and feet. Like the xenomorphs that caught the ALIENS crew in an elevator, from the Jim Cameron movie.

I looked at MJ, he looked at me, both of us shocked. "These people are crazy!" said Michael...but in a funny way, not mean or judgmental. Myself? Let's say it seriously made me consider that Homo sapiens has base-level genetic issues, made worse in crowds.

The task was now mine, to get MJ safely out. And I wasn't even sure where the stairwell led. Walls and rails were painted one color, white, and the stairs were construction metal.

Looking at the stairwell over the side, it was quite a way down. No wall phones, and lights were bare fluorescent tubes here and there. My number one worry was, here come the cuckoos from the theatre. But it was oddly hush in here.

Down we went, five floors as a guess. Everything looked exactly the same, everywhere. And then we got to a floor level. There was a door here, one of those protection builds with an inner bar handle. I cracked it.

The door opened outside Caesars Palace, right into the circular valet under the Omnimax. A single limo was parked, clearly Jackson's, and not a person stood around, anywhere.
No way I was going to take Michael outside. Irresponsible. Still, I wasn't sure what to do. Keeping him safe was priority one. So I closed the door and told him the situation. His response?

"Aw, that's alright. We can just stand and talk awhile. That car ain't goin' nowhere."

I was charmed by that, but also concerned. I walked back up the inner stairs half a level, looked around for another solution. Nope. So I came back and checked outside the valet again: still nobody. I closed the door and sat a few steps up the stairs, maybe five feet from Jackson. I said, "Let's give it ten minutes? If nobody shows at the car, I'll go find security. You'll be fine."

Michael stood at the end of the stairs, hands on rail. And there we were, again looking through each other's eyes. He was thinking of something I couldn't see. Like before. Wanting to ask a question. Then he said, "Thank you for taking care of me. I've really enjoyed meeting you."

I was impressed and felt a little guilty...considering I'd never bought a single MJ album. Way too busy with Stevie Wonder and Chaka Khan, you know.

"It's been great meeting you, too." From that Michael smiled. Hard. And *still* there was something he wanted to say. I'll of course never know what it was. But the recollection of the two of us just perfectly staring at each other, for *minutes*. Again. Hm.

Stares faded, MJ used his right hand to sort of investigate the metal rail. The white paint mentioned earlier was peeling here and there, and it puzzled him. Michael looked at me, then lightly pulled the paint. It flaked-off, a nice patch. He examined the flake closely, dropped it, then looked at me again, big smile.

He pulled yet another flake of paint, checked it out. He dropped *that* flake, went for another. Then he froze. He studied what he'd been doing and almost blushed.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I peeled some of your paint."

I found it pretty funny. "No problem at all."

Then I heard something, outside. I went for a look out the door. Sure enough DiLeo and the other manager were back at the limo, arguing with three Caesars security guys. An older man walked to the limo just then. Michael's father?

I turned to MJ and said, "You're free." He stood up and came to the door. "We made it, didn't we?" He turned to leave but wanted to shake my hand. He did. He kept my hand for at least five full seconds, gave me a deep look.

Then he walked away. Into the night. The guys at the limo saw him and went crazy. They half-ran his direction, but not before Michael turned to me with a huge smile and a sweet, slow wave of his brilliant glove.

I closed the door and walked back to the theatre.

Years later I borrowed Michael Jackson's peeling of paint for a script called SPARKLE DARK. The actress attached at the time (Emily Hampshire from Schitt's Creek, etc.) really loved the clip...but it had nothing to do with Michael. Just an inspiration. A good one.

As time went on, reports of Michael Jackson's issues made news. None of the accusations seemed strange to me, for the most. True, I've always doubted some of the more heinous tales, because people are inclined to do and say incredible things, for money.

But the fact is, some of the awful stories about MJ are possibly real.

My overall impression of Michael Jackson was, he never grew past a developmental age of 9, maybe 11 max. It does happen.

Yeah, life is a tough call for most who live it. In many ways, totally unacceptable patterns rain from all skies, always. Just on a different schedule.

RIP Michael.

End.